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Vikki Medaglia
Bates College

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Marketing to Libraries

Making Sense of Electronic Resources

by Vikki Medaglia (Bates College) <vmedagl@bates.edu>



I have always wanted to try my hand at writing an op-ed; this looks like my big chance. For the four interviews I've done for this column, I've tried to ask parallel questions. The basic themes were: who are you? What does the phrase "library market" mean to you? How do you position yourself, your organization, your products and services with relation to market forces? Which of these forces have the greatest impact on you now? Which do you think will effect you and your operations most in the next few years? How do your interpretation of "library market" and the environmental changes you perceive influence your planning processes? After talking with two publishers, two librarians and a vendor, it seemed like a good time to survey the literature. I got my first surprise when I looked in *Library Literature*. There are no subject headings related to any of the concepts I associate with marketing to libraries. The index pointed me to "public relations" from "marketing." Public relations, while an important aspect of marketing, is limited. I needed information on all facets of marketing within the context of providing library services. I next looked under "vendors" and was referred to "information brokers" or "jobbers, suppliers and wholesalers." I finally found some articles that appeared to be related under "serial publications." I took them home and settled in for a night of serious reading.

The articles were my second surprise. There were several analyses of specific applications of technology. There were many broadly drawn murals of "the library of the future" and "the electronic library." What seemed to be missing were articles describing the processes we're struggling with right now, as we make our transitions from paper to whatever comes next. I found no guidelines for determining the mix of services it is appropriate for a given institution to offer, no discussion of why packages are designed as they are. I found no broad evaluations of product mixes that had been tried, nor any analysis of differences in the way users employ the same material presented in different formats. In short, I found no information I could apply to my institution's quest for optimal service to our constituencies. Consequently, I thought I would use this column to formulate some questions to help each of us evaluate our position in a highly competitive marketplace.

When I came to Bates College in 1992, the standards to which college libraries as-

pired included accurate online catalogs with ample terminals on campus, access to some databases, such as union lists, a few workstations dedicated to CD-ROM databases or online services, and some level of electronic fund accounting. Within three years, this model had become woefully inadequate. Now, we talk of providing seamless access through WorldWide Web interfaces. CD-ROMS have to be networked; more databases have to be available from more locations. Databases are often mounted on the OPAC, or local holdings are linked to other databases. Librarians have to provide more mechanical, technical and remote services. Libraries may no longer require walls, but they are increasingly dependent on electronics and the people who maintain them.

Every year, when we gather to prepare the next year's budget, we look at what we've spent in the current year. First, we look at Serials. We estimate the increase in the price of our current journal subscriptions. We consider cancellations and additions. We try to arrive at a budget request that reflects real costs and has a chance of serving the College-wide budgeting process. We evaluate our subscriptions to indexes as part of this review.

Subsequently, we look at a line we named "electronic resources" in the days when such things were new enough not to have resolved themselves into mere iterations of familiar tools in new formats. "Electronic resources" includes goods and services provided via electronic media: access to remote databases, CD-ROMs, and some searching and document delivery services. Many of these are indexes; an increasing number include fulltext of journal articles. Some newer ones are journals with searchable text. We compare our bundle of electronic offerings with our print offerings, looking for duplication.

At any time during the budget cycle, we may contract with a vendor to provide an electronic product bundle. We assume we'll be able to cancel print tools if the new package works out, but we leave time to test the new product before we actually cancel. In my role as Serials Librarian/Pandora, I find myself asking the same questions of different working groups, about different applications. I'd like to ask them here, to see if you, librarians, vendors and publishers, have been asking them, too or, better, if you've come up with any answers.

What is this product? Increasingly, it

seems, individual titles are bundled into attractive packages. How much of this bundle duplicates what we currently get in paper or another bundle? How much directly supports our curriculum? How much is of marginal value to most of our users? To how many of the journals indexed do we subscribe? What impact will this have on inter-library loan or document delivery services? How will we present this product? Do we have the necessary hardware or will we have to purchase equipment? If we mount it on our local network, will it work with existing software? Can we secure it from unlicensed use? How many simultaneous users do we anticipate? Will it effect network response time? Is our network support good enough to ensure this will actually be available? Is vendor support sufficient to guarantee it will remain available? Can users with older equipment use it effectively? How will we provide instruction in its use? Can we anticipate use and schedule bibliographic instruction or will it be better to offer instruction as needed? What can we do for the user who phones in and needs help now? What costs are associated with this product, beyond subscription and licensing? What use-based telecommunications, delivery or printing costs may accrue? Will the library have to supply paper, fix the printer, help users get to the point where they can begin to search? What impact might this have on current staffing levels and work loads? If an electronic product replaces print, what is the real cost? If there is a price break this year, what will the difference in price be the next year? What advantages does the same electronic version offer? Based on use and other factors, is the difference in price warranted?

How do we arrive at ways of answering these questions that will serve us for more than one decision-making cycle? How do we evaluate our mix and adjust it to suit our needs better over time?

Lots of questions. In another year or two, there will be answers — articles outlining processes that have worked for some of us. In the meantime, I'd like to offer these questions as a starting place for the next round of "Marketing to Libraries" columns. I'd welcome input from anyone who is interested in talking more about this exciting and perplexing set of challenges. Maybe we can find ways to cope more creatively with the world we're creating for ourselves and our customers. 🐼